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The Gray-Haired Dabblers in Doom

A small, super-secret group of old men, seven or eight at most, bear responsibility for the Kremlin's decision on military intervention in Poland.

This gray-haired, gray-clad inner circle of Communist Party elders is known simply as the Defense Council. Its deliberations in the Byzantine elegance of the czarist council chambers produce decisions that affect the peace and well-being of the whole world.

Little is known about the Defense Council. In fact, its very existence was not officially acknowledged until 1976, in a passing reference to Soviet President Leonid I. Brezhnev's role as council chairman. The Soviet constitution published the following year includes a brief mention of the Defense Council, stating that it is "formed" by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet.

A special Defense Intelligence Agency appraisal, "USSR: Defense Council's Role in Decision Making," contains everything our experts know about the secret group. The appraisal, which was shown to my associate Dale Van Atta, is just four pages long.

A summary of what our intelligence experts have been able to learn about the council:

- It is "The main coordinator of defense-related activities of all government bodies, providing key recom-

mendations on defense policy to the Politburo and ensuring that party policy is correctly executed by state organs."

- The members of the Defense Council, as near as the DIA has been able to determine, include Brezhnev; Defense Minister Dmitri Ustinov, a civilian technocrat; Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko; Premier Nikolai Tikhonov, replacing the late Alexei Kosygin, his longtime boss; KGB boss Yuri Andropov; Nikolai Ogarkov, military chief of staff, and Leonid Smirnov, chief of the Military Industrial Command. Yakov Ryabov was believed to have been a member, until he was dumped from his post as Communist Party secretary for defense affairs.

- With that lineup, the Defense Council has undeniable clout. As the DIA report puts it, "Since key Defense Council members are also the top Politburo personalities most concerned with military-political issues, [its] recommendations are probably almost assured of party approval." In fact, sources said, there is no known instance of the Politburo overturning a major decision by the Defense Council.

- "The Defense Council occupies an intermediary role between the highest party and government organizations involved in national security affairs," the DIA concluded. "It provides top-

level coordination for all government activities relating to defense, establishing the general guidelines for Soviet military development."

- "The council probably reviews Military Industrial Commission decisions that authorize the design, development and production of major weapons systems. Defense Council approval may also be necessary for any program revisions."

- The Defense Council also has a key role in overseeing the way Communist Party policy is carried out by the military, and in the formulation of that policy.

What it all boils down to is that the Soviet Defense Council apparently combines the functions of our National Security Council, defense secretary and Joint Chiefs of Staff. But the repeated use of such fudge words as "probably" and "implies" and "may" in the DIA analysis betrays the basic uncertainty that surrounds our Kremlinologists' assessment of the secret group. Our intelligence experts can make educated guesses, but, in the end, they are still only guesses.

One thing emerges clearly from the DIA report, however: seven or eight old men in the murky depths of the Kremlin hold the fate of mankind in their hands. An error of judgment by the Soviet Defense Council could blow up the world.